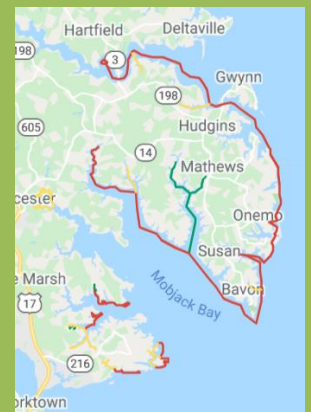
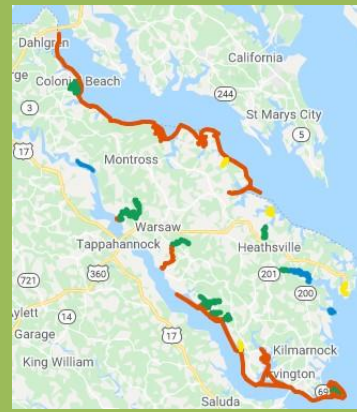
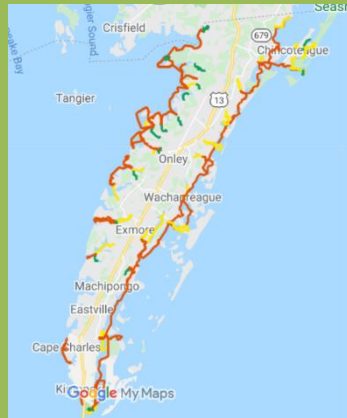


Virginia Oyster & Water Trail Eco-Tourism Collaboration



Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program

Accomack-Northampton Planning District Commission
Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission
Northern Neck Planning District Commission

NOAA Grant: NA19NOS4190163
Grant Year 2019 Task 72

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Fiscal Year 2019 Virginia Oyster & Water Trail Eco-Tourism Collaboration Report
November, 2020

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Task 72

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Summary

The third year of this project has combined tourism, stewardship, and economic development in a sustainable way to grow the economy while minimizing ecological impacts. The Eastern Shore, Middle Peninsula and Northern Neck continued to work together to build, expand, and refine eco-tourism initiatives, particularly those created during year 1 and 2 of this project under grant numbers NA17NOS4190152 and NA18NOS4190152. Efforts brought focus on diverse coastal ecosystems, engaged local stakeholders to avoid use conflicts, and created a sustainable plan for economic and educational initiatives that need long-term planning in order to survive and thrive. The primary means of sustainable planning during this year included a 36-month Marketing Strategy and Action Plan to propel the regions beyond the conclusion of this three-year project to ensure the wide-spread use and success of Ecotourism as related to the Water Trail website and associated assets – assets that support and generate direct, indirect, and induced natural resource dependent jobs. The individual products and cumulative effects of this program addressed identified targets in the [2014 New Virginia Economy Strategic Plan](#) and [Virginia Statewide Tourism Plan](#).

During year 3, the Accomack-Northampton Planning District Commission (A-NPDC) engaged the Eastern Shore Water Trails stakeholders who guided the update of the Seaside Water Trail in year 1 and development of the Bayside Water Trail in year 2, to ensure the water trails remained up-to-date and safe. A-NPDC staff continued to organize the Rural Coastal Virginia Alliance (RCVA) Ecotourism Steering Committee, serve on the Marketing Subcommittee, facilitate the [Virginia Ecotour Guide Certification Program](#), staff the Eastern Shore Regional Navigable Waterways Committee, and ensure continuity among all aspects of the overall project. The Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission (MPPDC), known as Virginia's River Country, continued to partner with local organizations and stakeholders to identify assets and plan for continued water trail expansion and improvement. Building on past ecotourism products for the Middle Peninsula Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority (MPCBPAA), the MPPDC developed an application for the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) Community Business Launch (CBL) program and developed a Corporate Sponsorship Marketing Plan for their portion of the Water Trail website. An Economic Impact Analysis of the effects of ecotourism related businesses was conducted on the Middle Peninsula as well. The Northern Neck Planning District Commission (NNPDC) staff and the Northern Neck Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority (NNCBPAA) updated existing water trails throughout the region created through past Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program (VCZMP) funded projects and integrated these into tourism and economic development planning and outreach. They used the [National Water Trail System Best Management Practices toolbox](#) and focused on delivering cultural, historical, and stewardship messages, in order to help consumers understand the ecological importance and economic opportunities the Chesapeake Bay watershed presents.

Positive impacts of this 3-year project continued to be realized in the regions and through

implementation of the RCVA Marketing Strategy – initially through the Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC) grant application, and the Middle Peninsula DHCD CBL application developed during year 3 and the Corporate Sponsorship Marketing Plan, and the Virginia Oyster Trail (VOT) trainings and relationships. Additionally, Virginia Water Trails was recognized in [Distinction Magazine](#) and Williamsburg Magazine (fall 2020). Several statements throughout the articles are inaccurate and staff provided corrections. In Virginia’s rural coastal regions these programs helped strengthen economic value, create jobs and sustain ecological assets in the face of stressors, such as decreasing population, declining economic growth, the COVID-19 pandemic, and changing landscapes exacerbated by sea level-rise. The synergistic effect of working together across regional boundaries produced results on a large scale, created a sustainable ecological and economic model, and showed an environmental and economic return on investment for years to come.

Products and Outcomes

The following sections describe the activities completed during calendar year 2020 and their current and anticipated outcomes.

Rural Coastal Virginia Alliance Ecotourism Steering Committee Outcomes

A-NPDC staff continued to organize and facilitate collaborative meetings of the Rural Coastal Virginia Ecotourism Steering Committee established during grant number NA17NOS4190152 in grant year 2017. Minutes can be found on the [Water Trails page](#) of the A-NPDC website.

Mission

“The Rural Coastal Virginia Alliance exists to present unique ecotourism activities and destinations for locals and visitors to easily enjoy. The three alliance partners embrace sustainable, vibrant, healthy ecosystems, and a resilient, diversified, nature-based economy.”

Vision

“Connecting locals and visitors to world-class ecotourism destinations.”

2019 Committee Commitment

“This Committee will ensure that all projects emphasize community development, environmental stewardship, entrepreneurial growth, health attributes, and the cultural integration of the coastal communities. Fundamental to their outreach, economic, and educational attributes, the project programs focus on increasing ecological and economic potential of the benefits wetlands, waterways, and oysters and wildlife have to the health of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.”

Following the Vision Statement, Goals, and Objectives decided upon in year 1, the Committee discussed updates to the format and the digital platform of the water trails, so that they remain compatible with relevant, external websites and to ensure the most user-friendly format. Working closely with VCZMP staff, this Committee guided the RCVA *Marketing Strategy and Action Plan* development.

This group worked with the regional partners, including the Virginia CZM Program, Virginia Tourism Corporation and the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, to guide the Virginia Ecotour Guide Certification course, working on the plan initiated during year 1 and further refined in year 2 of this project.

This Committee ensured that all projects emphasize community development, environmental stewardship, entrepreneurial growth, health attributes, and the cultural integration of the coastal communities. Fundamental to their outreach, economic, and educational attributes, the project programs focus on increasing ecological and economic potential of the benefits of wetlands, waterways, oysters and wildlife have on the health of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.

The Rural Coastal Virginia Alliance Ecotourism Steering Committee (Steering Committee) met in 2019 on December 4, and in 2020 on March 5, June 4, and September 3. Meeting agendas, minutes, and supplemental information can be found at <http://www.anpdc.org/water-trails/>.

RCVA 36-month Marketing Strategy and Action Plan and VTC Application

The products and plans developed in year 1 and year 2 were used to strategically integrate these ecotourism products into the Rural Coastal Virginia Alliance (RCVA) Virginia Water Trails 36-month [Marketing Strategy and Action Plan](#) (Plan). The Steering Committee and Consociate media and marketing experts weaved together concepts, products, and web-based engagement tools into a strategic and implementable 36-month plan. The Plan used the data collected and lessons learned from work done for the Middle Peninsula Water Trails to guide development of the Plan for promoting ecotourism and water trail-based activities in RCVA. Implementation of this plan insures that the investment in ecotourism products during this 3-year project will continue to impact the three rural coastal regions and coastal Virginia as a whole. To that end, A-NPDC staff drafted an application to the Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC) to move forward with the most appropriate actions identified for implementation during the first year of the 36-month Plan. This application was submitted by the PDCs to VTC.

In addition, throughout the year, the www.VirginiaWaterTrails.com website, which was initiated with unique branding and an attractive landing page in year 1, continued to be updated as needed. The intention was to inspire new water-based recreation users and educate them about the

coastal region habitats, ecosystem services, tides and safety concerns, and experiential opportunities in the area. The A-NPDC administered the contract with Consociate, the Virginia Oyster Trail (part of the Marketing Subcommittee), and with the two multi-region contractors responsible for this important project and participated in advisory meetings.

This product (Product #2) provided a three-year marketing guidance, which will continue to be developed as needed, to guide this project beyond the initial three-years made possible by NOAA and the VCZMP.

Virginia Oyster Trail Trainings and Collaborative Marketing

Due to COVID-19, the Virginia Oyster Trail (VOT) Trip Planner (Figure 1) and Collaborative Marketing training events, which were initially scheduled as physical events across the three PDC regions, were converted to virtual presentation events. Three Zoom webinar meetings were held, each focusing on a specific rural coastal region (Northern Neck - August 18, 2020, Middle Peninsula - August 19, 2020 and Eastern Shore - August 20, 2020) with each event open to cross-connected attendance from across the entire Virginia Oyster Trail footprint and Virginia's coastal regions. Each training was held from 10:00 – 11:30 a.m. and were well attended, to include staff from each of the three PDCs, wherein they presented regional updates and introduced the Virginia Water Trails asset.



Figure 1: VOT Mobile Responsive Trip Planner Presentation Slide.

The unified training presentations emphasized the strengths of the active partnership between the Virginia Oyster and Water Trails, introducing their shared “Merroir-Terroir” focus which, as defined by the VOT, is “*the palate celebration that occurs when the textures and flavors of the sea are paired with the regional, companion-grown products of the land.*” Attendees were provided a detailed orientation on how the two programs align, with particular emphasis on the integrated Visitor Trip Planner Map and Itinerary Building system. They were provided a breakdown of the tools for engagement and the new “Business to Business” networking feature of the VOT’s website’s member dashboard system, wherein the Trip Planner guide for use is permanently housed for future reference by the members.

[CLICK HERE](#) to view the presentation as held for the Northern Neck region (each training followed this same format).

Additionally, throughout the grant period the VOT participated in RCVA steering committee planning meetings, contributing to the efforts to develop a 36-month Marketing Strategy and Action Plan that will increase the visibility of the Virginia Oyster and Water Trails, their coastal recreational, environmental and economic assets as relates to raising awareness and

the visitor experience.

Eastern Shore Water Trails Refinement and Connectivity

Year 3 of this project included the addition of the [Bayside water trails](#) and assets, updated icons for VOT sites to align with the VOT Trip Planner, and addition of Bayside birding and wildlife sites. A-NPDC staff continued to engage the Water Trail stakeholders identified during grant years 2017 and 2018, which consists of representatives from stakeholders in the region. Participants were not limited to individuals from the following agencies/organizations, but included Virginia Tourism Corporation, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF), Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Chincoteague Bay Field Station, Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS), United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC), Eastern Shore of Virginia Angler's Club, the Shellfish Growers of Virginia, ecotour guide operators (Cape Charles Boat Company, Southeast Expeditions, etc.), local watermen and aquaculture operators (Cherry Stone, etc.), and the coastal Towns and Counties. These stakeholders were engaged via email, phone, and in-person meetings as needed to provide input as to potential improvements or potential relevant changes in areas where the trail passes. This input helped prevent possible use-conflicts and potential dangers/hazards. Every effort was made to continue to communicate regularly with these stakeholders moving forward, beyond the scope of this grant year to continue to keep the Water Trail relevant and make improvements as necessary. The updated Trail not only ensured the safety of the users, but also aided in accomplishing goals outlined in the regional [Stronger Economies Together](#) (SET) Economic Development Plan and [Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy](#) (CEDS).

Eastern Shore Navigable Waterways Committee

The [Eastern Shore of Virginia Regional Navigable Waterways Committee](#) (ESRNWC) is a bi-county committee formed in 2015 to study and plan for navigable waterway needs. It was formed on the foundation built by the [Eastern Shore Navigation Partnership](#) with the Norfolk District of the United States Army Corps of Engineers. The Committee is tasked with advising their respective Boards on the condition and status of all navigable waterways, listing and prioritizing the Shore's water navigation needs, and providing possible solutions to water transport needs. The Committee is staffed by the A-NPDC to ensure regional management approach, with locality funding. The Committee has been updated as to the progress on the Water Trails and has provided guidance to help avoid conflicts. With the United States Coast Guard and representatives of the aquaculture industry in regular attendance, this provided invaluable input to avoid user conflicts, potential safety hazards, and allow the water trail to update its page and map to avoid

these issues. RFPs, minutes, and meeting packets can be found on the ESRNWC page of the A-NPDC website [here](#).

Virginia Certified Ecotour Guide Course

The A-NPDC facilitated the 2020 iteration of the Virginia Certified Ecotour Guide Course. The Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program has helped develop and fund several Ecotour Guide certification courses since 1992, with curriculum input from the Department of Conservation and Recreation's Division of Natural Heritage and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science. The program continues to grow in collaboration with the Virginia Tourism Corporation, local coastal planners, community colleges, State Park interpreters, Virginia Green, and private stakeholders. In 2016 the A-NPDC facilitated the course, which resulted in 16 new Virginia Certified Ecotour Guides from the Eastern Shore to southern Virginia Beach. As a result, a new partnership with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) Virginia Coast Reserve was also formed, wherein the Ecotour Guide Certification is a prerequisite for participation in their Commercial Access Permit Program. After the 2-year pilot phase of the Commercial Access Permit Program, this partnership continues. Tourism is a major driver in Virginia's economy and ecotourism is especially important in coastal Virginia. Ecotourism connects people to the natural resources that the Virginia CZM Program is striving to protect, and - hopefully - instills a strong will to take care of these life-sustaining resources. Having continuity in a certification program helps Virginia stand out as a destination for ecotourism and ensures quality guided experiences in to sensitive coastal ecosystems. In the 2020 iteration of this course we certified 18 new Virginia Ecotour Guides from a wide span of coastal regions and a variety of ecotourism to include aquaculture operators who intend to offer tours, charter captains, educational interpreters of oyster aquaculture, and artists.

Northern Neck Water Trails Update and Tourism Integration

NNPDC staff and the Northern Neck Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority (NNCBPAA) updated existing water trails throughout the region created through past CZM funded projects and built off the outcomes from previous grant years which saw the creation of the Rural Coastal Virginia Alliance (RCVA) ecotourism collaboration and the Virginia Water Trails strategic site development by integrating the Northern Neck Water Trails with the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail, Virginia Water Trails, and the Virginia Oyster Trail.

NNPDC staff integrated existing water trails in the region with the recently created Virginia Water Trails website. NNPDC staff built off the outcomes from previous grant years by updating their format and integrating the water trails onto the Google Maps-based digital platform in parallel fashion to the existing interactive digital water trails for the Eastern Shore and Middle Peninsula. The end result was compatibility and ease of access with Virginia Water Trails in order to create

a cohesive product that has the end-user in mind. NNPDC staff utilized the methodology, symbologies, and lessons learned created by A-NPDC in previous grant years to develop the Eastern Shore water trails. The updated Northern Neck water trails will generate ecotourism opportunities by allowing visitors to plan their on-water experience and will allow anyone to explore the region's waterways online.

NNPDC staff integrated the regional water trails with the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail on the digital platform to create "spur" water trails that allow visitors to explore the tributaries and inlets of the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers and the Chesapeake Bay. In doing so, it allows our regional water trails to leverage the visibility of an established National Park Service water trail.

NNPDC staff updated all fifteen (15) existing water trails in the Northern Neck to include more robust and historically accurate interpretive components. Inclusions to the interpretive components included elements of the Indigenous Cultural Landscape as defined through efforts by the National Park Service and the Chesapeake Conservancy in collaboration with St. Mary's College of Maryland, specifically those elements outlined in Defining the Rappahannock Indigenous Cultural Landscape. The inclusion of these elements complements efforts by the Northern Neck Tourism Commission to leverage our region's rich heritage and cultural diversity to create a more textured experience for visitors. NNPDC staff conducted an inventory of ecologic and historical attractions strategically located in proximity to existing water trails and incorporated them onto the digital platform in order to create more robust ecotourism activities such as opportunities for recreational fishing, birding, and wildlife observation.

NNPDC staff incorporated the newly updated water trails on the digital platform with the Virginia Oyster Trail (VOT) by building off of the outcomes of previous grant years. NNPDC staff incorporated VOT sites onto the digital platform to facilitate ease of access and enhance ecotourism experiences for prospective visitors. NNPDC staff collaborated with the VOT to utilize the newly created Digital Itinerary Tool and Trip Planner for the Virginia Oyster Trail. NNPDC and the VOT generated Northern Neck specific itineraries showcasing the myriad and varied ecotourism activities in the region. The result allows prospective visitors to plan their visit both on and off the water and serves to link visitors with local businesses that support our ecotourism industry.

Ecotourism Outfitters Workshop in the Northern Neck

NNPDC staff and the Northern Neck Tourism Commission (NNTC) collaborated to plan an Ecotourism Outfitters Workshop in the Northern Neck. NNPDC staff developed a list of potential invitees from throughout the Northern Neck region and surrounding areas, including King George. Target attendees were ecotour guides, small-scale outfitters, charter boat operations, marinas, historic sites and museums with on-water visitor experiences.

NNPDC staff developed an agenda (Product #3) for the three-hour workshop with the sponsorship of the NNTC. Targeted participants were ecotour guides and ecotourism outfitters from outside the Northern Neck region. NNPDC staff received commitments from targeted participants and special guests. The general format for the three-hour workshop is a series of presentations from special guests with Q&A sessions, a round table discussion, and a keynote address. The workshop will begin with a presentation from the NNTC on the state of ecotourism and ecotourism collaboration in the Northern Neck. This will be followed by an update from DCR on the Virginia Outdoors Plan. This will be followed by a presentation of Virginia's Certified Ecotour Guide Course. The heart of the workshop will be a panel discussion hosted by the NNTC and featuring special guests representing ecotour guides and outfitters from across the State. The panel discussion will focus on the technical and entrepreneurial aspects of ecotour guide and outfitter business. The workshop will include resources and networking opportunities. The workshop will conclude with a keynote address from special guest Cassidy Rasnick, Director of the Governor's Office of Outdoor Recreation. Expected outcomes include future collaboration with the NNTC, networking opportunities among businesses, inter-regional and interagency collaboration, and entrepreneurial growth opportunities.

Originally, the planned workshop was to be held in the Spring of 2020, but restrictions forced by the Covid-19 pandemic precluded an in-person workshop with attendees traveling from throughout the Coastal Virginia region. The NNPDC and the NNTC intend to hold the planned workshop in-person, preferably, at the earliest date allowed by Covid-19 restrictions. Alternatively, NNPDC staff developed a plan for holding the workshop digitally via an online platform, though this option will only be considered as a last resort due to the preferred outcomes of an in-person event.

Middle Peninsula Trail Expansion

MPPDC staff worked with the Friends of the Rappahannock to add water trails to the Rappahannock River, including Hoskin Creek and Mill Creek. MPPDC staff also added a water trail on the Piankatank River. This water trail begins at the shore of an 8.86-acre property owned by the Middle Peninsula Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority. The trail heads east past an oyster restoration area. The 2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement, which guides the work of the Chesapeake Bay Program, calls for state and federal partners to "restore native oyster habitat and populations in 10 Bay tributaries by 2025, and ensure their protection" (hereafter, '10 tributaries outcome'). Five tributaries are being restored in Virginia, and five in Maryland. An overview of Bay-wide progress toward the 10 tributaries outcome is available at <https://www.chesapeakeprogress.com/abundant-life/oysters>. The Piankatank River Restoration Blueprint sets a goal of 438 acres of oyster reefs in the river. Currently 317 acres of oysters exist or have been restored and there are 121 acres remaining to be restored.

MPPDC staff also noted gaps for establishing water trails on the Rappahannock River.

Originally, the Friends of the Rappahannock recommended adding Mount Landing Creek to the water trails map; however, after some discussion, the access location the Friends uses to access this creek is a private location. Therefore, the closest public location is Tappahannock which is a little less than 3 miles away. Also, within the County the Middle Peninsula Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority owns a property adjacent to the Piscataway Creek named the Deshazo property. If the water is high enough, there is a potential to use this property as an access location to the Piscataway water trail connecting it to the existing public boat ramp on Piscataway adjacent to the US Rt 17 bridge (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Potential water trail location between the Deshazo property and the VDOT access location.

Another potential future location for accessing the Rappahannock River may be the Tappahannock Elementary School located north of the Town's historic district creating multiple public stops from Hoskins creek landing to Prince Street owned by the MPCBPAA to the School site and over to the private marina.

When looking at the region, as a whole, there are several areas with access gaps that will limit creation of water trails moving forward. Factors influencing accessibility include property ownership, site location, and conditions at the site (i.e. shoaling, high wave energy, erosion, parking, etc.). In Virginia only 1% of the coastline is publicly owned. Figure 3 is a map which generally identifies the gaps of access locations within the region; please note that a detailed gaps analysis has not taken place and more work will need to be completed to specifically identify sites

for new access opportunities.

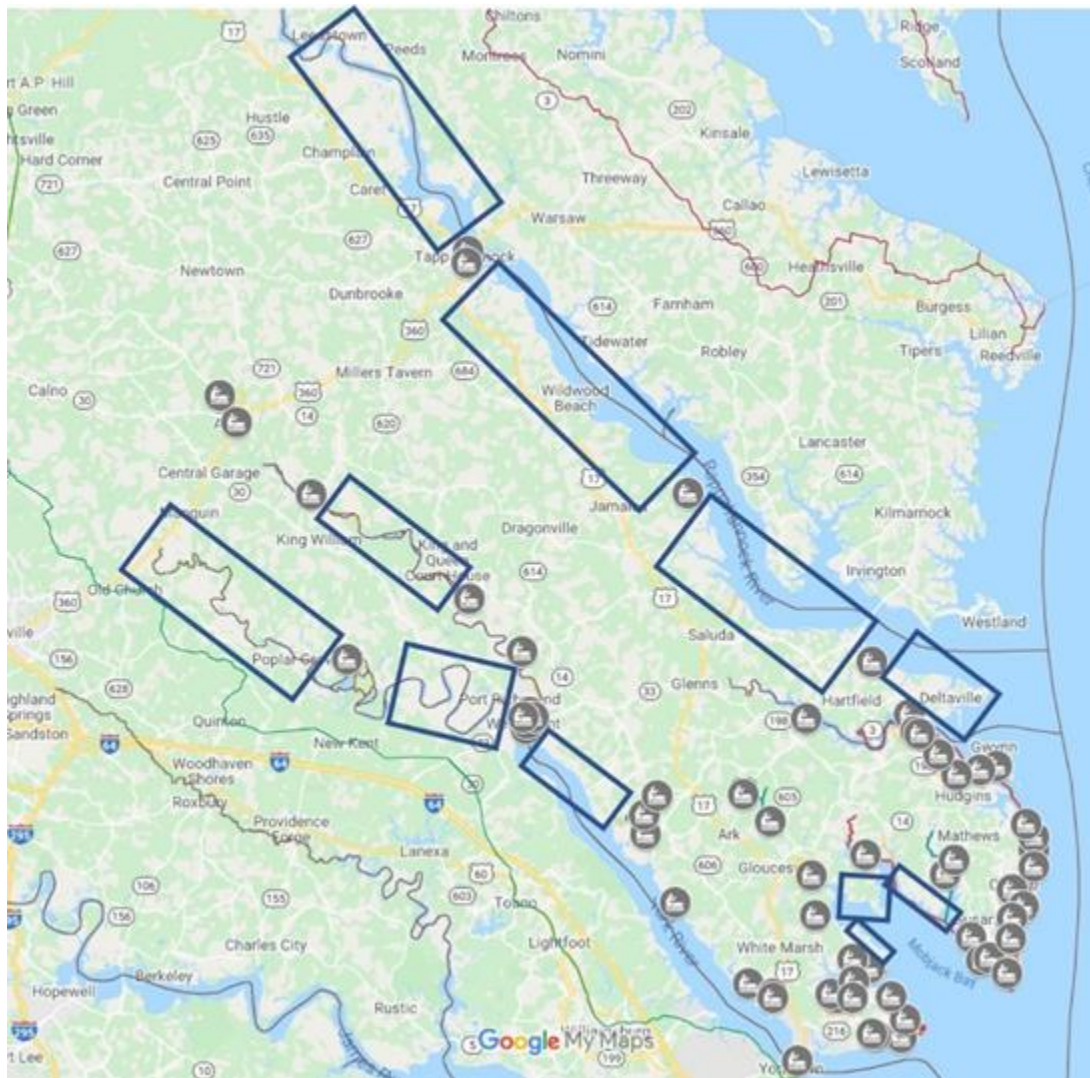


Figure 3: Map of access location gaps.

Finally, MPPDC staff worked to create a pamphlet of Middle Peninsula water trail maps that included ways to explore our rivers and points of interest. This pamphlet that will be used to support America's 250th commemorations in the years 2026-2031. We anticipate the pamphlet will be available at the MPPDC office, published digitally on the new Middle Peninsula Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority website, and will be referenced on the Virginia Water Trails website and on MPPDC and MPCBPAA Facebook accounts. MPPDC staff will also work with local tourism groups to distribute to visitors that come to Middle Peninsula region. Figure ___ is a draft of the pamphlet. MPPDC staff assumes that there will be a concerted marketing effort from the state closer to the commemorations and therefore these pamphlets will remain in draft form until then at which point MPPDC staff will edit and add messaging congruent with the state and the

commemorations. The final pamphlet will be shared and approved by the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program.



Figure 4: Snapshot of a Draft of Middle Peninsula Water Trails pamphlet for America's 250th commemorations in the years 2026 – 2031.

Middle Peninsula Public Access Authority Updates and Community Business Launch Program

MPPDC staff added information regarding the Virginia Water Trails and new lands acquired by the PAA that offer additional opportunities for ecotourism businesses in the region. These updated documents will be housed on the new PAA website that is scheduled to be launched in 2021.

To continue supporting and advancing the PAA Ecotourism Program, MPPDC staff prepared and submitted a proposal to the Virginia Department of Community Development's (DHCD) Community Business Launch (CBL) Grant Program on August 14, 2020. This program is designed to assist communities in taking a systems approach to defining and pursuing an asset-based small business development strategy. MPPDC staff proposed, to partner with the PAA, to develop a program that offers entrepreneurs that opportunity to utilize PAA public lands to create an eco-business. MPPDC and the PAA will utilize the Ecotourism Program to guide this program. The CBL program will help provide capital for the ecotourism program including funds to market the program and funds to go directly to the business to launch on PAA lands.

Middle Peninsula Marketing

MPPDC staff contracted with Consociate Media to develop a Corporate Sponsorship Marketing Plan (Product #4) for the Middle Peninsula Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority. To sustain the eco-tourism marketing opportunities on the Middle Peninsula, Consociate Media developed a Corporate Sponsorship Marketing Plan for the Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission (MPPDC). The plan integrated the land owned by the Middle Peninsula Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority (MPCBPAA) and how these holdings are utilized and leveraged for eco-tourism in the region.

The Corporate Sponsorship and Marketing Plan program includes two distinct programs – a sustainable funding stream and a major donor / sponsor funding stream.

The plan development process included the following:

- concept testing of corporate partnerships that sponsor MPCBPAA initiatives where a portion of sales are donated to an initiative;
- continued social media marketing to gauge organic reach into market;
- review of content marketing (blog posts) published on Virginia Water Trails website in 2019 to gauge long term impact of content marketing in eco-tourism space to feed a corporate marketing program;
- design and launch of an email newsletter for Virginia Water Trails;
- evaluation of landscape for sponsorships in a post-COVID-19 era; and
- research of other corporate sponsorship and influencer marketing programs.

First and foremost, in this post COVID-19 era, any corporate sponsorship package or program

must offer businesses a measurable result and benefit to their organization. Businesses and companies, as a result of a changed economy, have been forced to reduce advertising and marketing funds to keep operations running strong, and this trend is not likely to change quickly. Gone are the days when companies can or should be asked to support an organization with the only benefit in return being a logo placed on a web site. It needs to be more transactional, and measurable.

To be in a position to do that, to have something of value to sell and for companies to sponsor, Consociate Media recommended that the MPPDC and MPCBPAA continue to build itself up as a thought leader and influencer with access to a large community of consumers, and take an influencer marketing approach with its corporate sponsorship program. Only then can the corporate sponsorship package developed be sold.

The corporate marketing program and package developed includes selling sponsored space and content on active marketing channels (for example, the current Virginia Water Trails website, the current Virginia Water Trails email, social media channels, the new Middle Peninsula outdoor recreation site, the MPCBPAA app to connect watermen to customers, etc.). Selling sponsored space – blog posts that are published with links back to the company sponsoring the content, as an example – provides funding to sustain initiatives as well as benefits the company with exposure. This, by design, is an influencer marketing approach. *(The language in this product was developed by the MPPDC. The A-NPDC recognizes that no action can be taken regarding the Virginia Water Trails website without agreement from the entire Ecotourism Steering Committee & NOAA/VCZMP.)*

The major donor funding stream element of the program outlined how to solicit and reward the donation of time, talent, and treasure. The final deliverables of this corporate sponsorship package included a summary of the approach, suggested pricing structure (to grow over time), messaging on how to sell the sponsorships and sponsored content, and a way-ahead for fine tuning the marketing plan to sell the sponsorships / sponsored content.

In addition to the corporate sponsorship program development, the Middle Peninsula section of the Virginia Water Trails site was also shored up as part of this overall effort. That work included five new blog posts published, a series of photography taken at outdoor recreation sites on the Middle Peninsula and added to the web site, press release and outreach on a corporate partnership developed in 2020, light continuation of social media marketing, and updates to the Middle Peninsula landing page on the site.

Middle Peninsula Ecotourism Economic Analysis

MPPDC staff contracted with Chmura Economics & Analytics to conduct an economic analysis for the Middle Peninsula region focused on ecotourism and related industries. Chmura developed an infographic that defines ecotourism within the Middle Peninsula, shows the annual economic impact and growth of ecotourism, and it also included ecotourism related jobs. Please

see Products #5 and #6 for the infographic and inputs for the analysis. Overall, this analysis shows that ecotourism contributes substantially to the Middle Peninsula region and the industry is expected to grow.

According to Chmura, moving forward, the most immediate improvement area for the study would be some primary data collection from ecotourism businesses and visitors. An intercept survey of visitors in the region would help better estimate the number of ecotourism visitors, provide details on where they are spending their money and how much, and identify potential areas for future growth. For businesses, a survey could confirm their ecotourism-related operations, estimate the number of employees and sales, and ask for other ecotourism businesses to contact which may not already be in the database.

LINKS: <https://mppdc.com/articles/reports/Ecotourism%20Infographic.pdf>

<https://mppdc.com/articles/reports/MPR%20Ecotourism%20IMPLAN%20Inputs.pdf>